



*Frank Ostaseski, Former Director of the Zen Hospice Project has developed 5 precepts as companions that we may use while accompanying the dying on their journey. He reminds us that it is not enough to take these as theories, or concepts—that to be understood or realized they have to be communicated through our actions.*

## **Cultivate “Don’t Know Mind”**

Now this is one of those Zen teachings that on the surface doesn’t seem to make any sense at all. Cultivate “don’t know mind.” What do we mean by that? For me it describes a mind that’s open and receptive. It’s a mind that’s not limited.

Suzuki Roshi, the founder of the San Francisco Zen Centre was fond of saying: “In the beginners mind there are many possibilities, but in the experts there are few.” When we come into the room of a dying person, filled with our knowing, our vision of the possibilities is obscured—limited by our thoughts about the experience and this can distance us from the person we’re serving. Imagine if we could come into the room of a dying person with “don’t know mind,” with fresh eyes, free of agendas, expectations or limitations—how would that change the experience?

There’s another Zen teaching, which is related to this. It says, not knowing is most intimate. When we don’t know, we have to stay very close to the experience. We have to allow the situation itself to inform our actions. It’s like going into a very dark cave without a flashlight. You have to feel your way along the wall to discover the path.

Just so with the dying. We try to remain open without preconceptions, feeling our way along—inch-by-inch—moment-to-moment, receptive, flexible, carefully observing the changing needs. Listening carefully also to our own inner voice. Sensing our urges. Trusting our intuition.

Our willingness to “not know” is at times our greatest asset. The degree to which we are able to live in this ever-fresh moment—that’s the measure of our ability to be of real service. Cultivate “don’t know mind.”

Excerpt from CD Being a Compassionate Companion: The Fifth Precept: Cultivate “Don’t Know Mind.” Frank Ostaseski. Zen Hospice.